

How to Eat Right to Reduce Stress

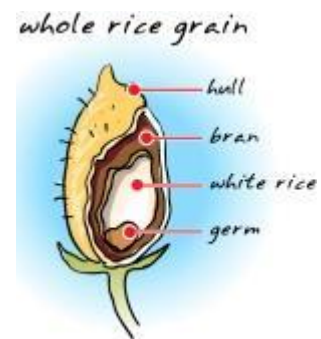


During times of stress, we often turn to traditional "comfort" foods such as macaroni and cheese, pizza, and ice cream. Ironically, these high-fat foods are usually the worst possible choices because they can make us feel lethargic and less able to deal with stress. Not only that, but stress can drive up our blood pressure and raise serum cholesterol levels, wreaking havoc on our arteries and increasing our risk of heart attack.

The best solution? Low-fat, high-fiber, carbohydrate-rich meals with plenty of fruits and vegetables. They soothe us without sapping our energy and give us the nutrients we need to boost our immune system. Here's a guide to which foods reduce stress and which foods make it worse:

Foods to Include

High-fiber, carbohydrate-rich foods: Scientists believe carbohydrates cause the brain to produce more serotonin, a hormone that relaxes us. And lots of fiber is helpful in preventing late-night binging. Some examples of healthy comfort food include baked sweet potatoes, minestrone soup, or sautéed vegetables over rice.



Fruits and vegetables: Chronic stress can weaken our ability to fight disease. By upping our intake of antioxidant-rich fruits and vegetables, we can boost our immune system. Acorn squash and carrots, for example, are great sources of the antioxidant beta-carotene. And citrus fruits provide plenty of vitamin C, another stress-busting antioxidant.

Foods to Avoid

High-fat foods: Fatty foods such as meat or cheese dishes and many baked goods thicken our blood which in turn makes us feel tired, even lethargic. This is clearly not a good way to reduce stress! Even just one high-fat meal can increase our risk of a heart attack.

Caffeine: Many of us deal with a stress-induced lack of sleep by turning to coffee, tea, and colas. Unfortunately, caffeine stays in our systems longer than many realize. Cutting back on caffeine can help with both sleeping problems and jitters.

Sugar: As a carbohydrate, sugar tends to calm us. The problem with sugar is that it's a simple carbohydrate so it enters and leaves the bloodstream rapidly, causing us to, in effect, "crash." On the other hand, complex carbohydrates such as pasta, beans, and lentils, the starchy parts of foods soothe without bringing us down.

